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ABSTRACT

Genesee Community College in Batavia, New York, adopted James Kinneavy's aims of discourse theory as the basis of its composition program. The program is a two-semester course for students who intend to transfer to four-year colleges. In a comparable nontransfer sequence, the first semester doubles as a remedial course for ill-prepared transfer students. Prior to the change, the composition program was based on general semantics and lacked a coherent series of composition assignments. A new department chairperson recommended the Kinneavy-based curriculum. The department thus drew up some common objectives, outlined a curriculum to meet those objectives, and decided to concentrate on the aims of discourse (persuasion, self-expression, science and so on) to the virtual exclusion of the modes or forms of discourse (e.g., narration, description). Teaching materials and a syllabus were developed, as were a textbook and teacher's manual, while Kinneavy himself conducted intensive workshops at the college. The program's advantages include its flexibility in method and content, and its adaptability to various intellectual levels. Evaluation of the curriculum has shown that students are meeting the objectives of the program, although some refinement of the program is needed. (Appendixes contain a list of textbooks and course outlines.) (BTH)

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AN "AIMS OF DISCOURSE" PROGRAM
FOR FRESHMAN ENGLISH

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AN "AIMS OF DISCOURSE" PROGRAM
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Although there have been many advances in rhetorical theory in the last fifteen years, speakers at CCCC continue to lament that most textbooks show no awareness of modern theory and few colleges have changed their curricula. Most composition programs, it is said, remain out-dated, chained to literature, incoherent, and constantly changing--changing as much from boredom as from the desire for true innovation.

However, substantial change can occur under certain conditions. The present article relates how one community college adopted a new theory as the basis of its composition program, put it into full operation, and stayed with it. Not only has the program proved to be durable; it also permits liberty within a coherent structure and has proved so intellectually challenging that there is little desire for basic changes.

The theory adopted was James Kinneavy's "aims" theory, as proposed in his book A Theory of Discourse (originally published by Prentice-hall, 1971; reissued by W. W. Norton). In 1970, when prepublication knowledge about his theory began to spread, this theory became the basis for the composition program at Genesee Community College in Batavia, New York. Kinneavy's "aims of discourse" remain the foundation of GCC's program today, eleven years later.

The program to be described here is a two-semester course for transfer students, which we call English 101-102, Introduction to Communications. We also have a nontransfer sequence, English 100-105, in which Eng. 100 doubles as a remedial course for ill-prepared transfer students.

HISTORY OF THE PROGRAM

Before 1970, GCC's composition program was based on general semantics, with the main text being S. I. Hayakawa's Language in Thought and Action. Because this book is not really a composition text, each teacher supplemented it with a rhetoric, rhetoric-handbook, or reader. We lacked a coherent, agreed-upon series of composition assignments and skills to be taught. Consequently, we had become unhappy with the curriculum and were ready to try something different.

In 1970, our former department chairman resigned and was replaced by Frank Jackson, a graduate of the University of Texas and one of James Kinneavy's students. He recommended that we adopt a Kinneavy-based curriculum, and we agreed to try it.

This was not a unanimous decision, but in those days the college was committed to innovation and backed its commitment with money. Furthermore, Jackson quickly enlisted the support of several administrators and faculty members who saw the potential of Kinneavy's theory.

Jackson also had several other factors going for him. For example, our experiences with Hayakawa had already given us a "communications" approach to composition. Thus we had considerable knowledge about some of the ideas which are basic to Kinneavy's theory, and we did not need to break out of the stranglehold which literature has imposed on many composition programs.

Secondly, as a three-year-old college we had a young and enthusiastic faculty which was not afraid to try something different. We considered ourselves part of the "community college movement," which was dedicated to developing its own approach to higher education. We also had no illusions that we could use a required freshman composition course to bring culture to the masses instantaneously.

Finally, to keep this disparate collection of English teachers together, the college had a commitment to common objectives for all teachers of a particular course. The general practice was for the teachers to agree upon a list of ob-

jectives for the course, which were then summarized in the catalogue description of the course. Teachers could use their own methods of reaching the goals, but they were required to focus on the same goals. The common objectives have helped us to stay together over the years.

To set up the new course, the first tasks, therefore, were to draw up the objectives and outline a curriculum to meet those objectives. We chose to concentrate on the aims of discourse (persuasion, self-expression, science, etc.) to the virtual exclusion of the modes, or forms of discourse (narration, description, etc.); for the time being, the aims looked more promising. We figured that later, as we grew more secure in our knowledge of the aims, we could begin to incorporate the modes where appropriate.

The curriculum that eventually evolved is outlined in the accompanying chart (Appendix B). It begins with an overview of all six aims and then has a separate unit to cover each aim in more detail. Persuasive and informative discourse are covered in the first semester, while exploration, science and self-expression are in the second. Literature is reserved for the sophomore level.

After we outlined the curriculum, the college paid some of us to work over the summer to write some "starter" materials--a detailed syllabus, a complete textbook for the first semester, a list of films and filmstrips appropriate for each aim of discourse, and a teacher's manual of composition assignments and other exercises. These were printed by the college's duplicating department; the syllabus and textbook were sold to students through the college bookstore.

The Intermediate Studies Division, which handles most of the English 100 (remedial) sections, followed suit by arranging its own courses around the Kinneavy theory. The division also wrote and published a teacher's manual.

The major effort went into the first semester textbook, a mammoth combination of readings, exercises, assignments, and rhetorical apparatus. The college was at

the time dabbling in independent study, and the book was written so that students could work through the entire course independently.

Independent study did not work, primarily because we were unable to control procrastination by students; sometimes, as few as two or three students completed the course on time. Therefore, after several semesters of unsuccessful efforts, we broke up the book into an anthology, to be sold through the bookstore, and independent exercises and assignments which teachers duplicated and passed out in class. A project to write an independent study text for the second semester was abandoned, and the materials were broken up in a similar manner. (See Appendix A for a list of current textbooks.)

During this time, the college twice brought James Kinneavy himself from the University of Texas to give us some intensive workshops. He put us through a detailed exposure to his theories and gave us much helpful advice on how to adapt them to a freshman composition program.

The program which Kinneavy helped us set up has continued to evolve since those early days. All of the original textbooks have been revised at least once, and we have added other books and tinkered considerably with the details of each unit within the curriculum. But the basic program, as we originally outlined it in 1970, remains intact.

ADVANTAGES OF THE PROGRAM

What accounts for the durability of GCC's program? Besides the common objectives stated in the college catalogue, the program also has a number of distinct advantages over other curricula.

For one thing, the program permits considerable individual variation in method and content. A teacher is free to use lecture/discussion, small group study, inductive questioning, demonstration, or any other method appropriate to

his or her personality. The program is also media-free, so that those who want to use films, television, full-length books, newspapers, or other media can easily do so by choosing appropriate examples of each aim. Finally, it accommodates various historical tastes; traditional teachers can choose "quality" texts from any time in history, while the "hip," modern teacher can use texts about today's controversial issues.

A second advantage is that the program is easily adaptable to various intellectual levels. For example, English 100, our remedial and nontransfer course, is simply a lower-level version of English 101, the transfer course. English 100 teachers have units on persuasion and information, but they simplify the content on logic and style, emphasizing instead organization and basic mechanics.

To take another example, a teacher who interned at GCC is now working at a local high school and has adapted the Kinneavy theory for the high school level. Her students come to GCC with a decided advantage over other students, but they still have much to learn since the high school version doesn't have the intellectual depth of the college version.

A third example concerns a professor who came to GCC from British Columbia on a teacher exchange program. William Schermbucker took Kinneavy's theory home with him and developed a "Canadian version" of our program, complete with textbooks which use Canadian texts rather than texts by U.S. writers as examples and models for students.

A third advantage is that the program is so fundamental and so intellectually sound that we could hardly find a better alternative. It appeals to other faculty in the college because they can write their own assignments in Kinneavy's terminology. (If they can't, we help them do it.) It appeals to students because they can immediately apply the concepts to their other courses, and they can see that the kinds of writing we teach actually appears in the popular and technical media. We

can even draw some of our assignments from Writer's Market, showing students how the finished article would appear in the magazine or journal and how much the author would be paid for a successful manuscript.

Fourth, the program is not limited strictly to Kinneavy but permits teachers to incorporate useful material from nearly every theory of rhetoric. We have teachers using general semantics, sentence combining, Toulmin logic, daily journals, and so forth. Also, there is the opportunity (and, often, the necessity) for teaching basic mechanical skills.

Furthermore, the usefulness of these other materials and ideas is enhanced because they are not taught in isolation from their practical application in reading or writing, and the teacher can "pinpoint" their usage to places where they will be most helpful. For example, it would make little sense to have a lesson in transitions in the persuasive discourse unit where students seldom have problems with transitions. But including such a lesson in the scientific unit is very helpful; for some reason--possibly because they don't read much science--a lot of students can't handle transitions in scientific discourse.

Finally, the program has the advantage of being intellectually stimulating to teachers because it requires the use of so many ideas from the humanities and the other liberal arts. To be really successful, the teacher must draw from philosophy, ethics, linguistics, speech, math, science, and so forth. There is always something new to learn, and each unit can be improved as the teacher gains a better grasp of theory. Consequently, we have little pressure for "change for the sake of change" such as occurs in more sterile programs at other colleges.

EVALUATING THE COURSE

As everyone knows, evaluating the success of a composition course is tricky business. Even if a program successfully meets its own goals, that doesn't prove

that the goals are correct or that another school's program might not do a better job.

The fact that our program covers five aims of discourse and several kinds of essays for each aim makes the task even more difficult. Since we spend so little time on each kind of writing, we cannot hope to turn students into accomplished writers of any one kind of essay.

However, we have made a few sporadic attempts at evaluation. Once, back during the days when "relevance," "accountability," and "freedom of choice" were popular catch-words, some of our colleagues were pressing to drop freshman English from the list of required courses. To meet this challenge, we put together a pre-test and posttest made up of writing assignments from other courses, followed by multiple-choice questions about each assignment.

Our purpose was to see if students were learning one of the main skills of the program--the ability to recognize the type of writing called for in a situation and to recall the strategies required for carrying out that task. Preliminary results showed that most students did improve, but we could also see that the test itself needed a lot more work. Then "back to basics" became the new educational catch-word, ending the challenge to the composition requirement. With the pressure at an end, work on the test was, unfortunately, dropped.

We have also, on occasion, required students to write pretest and posttest essays for a unit or for one semester of the course. For example, students wrote a pretest news story at the beginning of Eng. 101 and another for a posttest at the end. In all such experiments, even a cursory examination shows that students do improve in their ability to handle the kinds of writing being taught. However, that is to be expected; even if a student learns nothing but the "conventions" of a particular type of writing, the posttest will appear to be better than the pretest. Without comparative data from other methods of teaching the same thing, the

results mean very little beyond showing that improvements do occur.

That has been the extent of our efforts to evaluate the program. Some might say that we should also have compared pretest and posttest writing samples for the mechanical errors, but that did not seem like a worthwhile task, mainly because in our short units we doubt whether a measurable reduction in mechanical errors will occur. Our overall impression is that the course accomplishes its goals fairly well. This impression is buttressed by informal comments from GCC graduates and from teachers in other areas. But, as with most composition programs, the task of proving that the program works is formidable and will probably not be done unless we receive outside help.

Even without such an evaluation, however, the main lesson to be drawn from the GCC program seems clear. A composition faculty that wants a durable and coherent curriculum must first adopt a sound theory of rhetoric on which to build its curriculum. Since few textbooks are grounded in modern theory, the faculty must select the theory and then the textbook, not vice-versa. Finally, much heralded discoveries such as sentence-combining must be fitted into the comprehensive theory; they are not in themselves theories of rhetoric.

No modern theories contain the final word about successful composition programs, but they are certainly an advance over the chaos and dissatisfaction produced by the absence of a theory.

APPENDIX A

Current Textbook Materials For The GCC Program

(Published by the Learning Resource Center, Genesee Community College)

FIRST SEMESTER

Freshman English Workshop - William McCleary and Frank Jackson

Toward Successful Term Papers - William McCleary

Varieites of Information and Persuasion: A Reader - Maxine Long

"Persuasion" - Frank Jackson

SECOND SEMESTER

Writing Formal Arguments - William McCleary

Exploratory, Scientific, and Expressive Discourse: A Reader -

William McCleary, Maxine Long, Frank Jackson

APPENDIX B

ENG. 101-102 at GENESEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

A KINNEAVY PROGRAM

- based on James Kinneavy's theory of "the aims of discourse"
- a course in the reading and writing of most types of non-literary prose

TOPICS COVERED

ENGLISH 101

Unit I: Overview of the Aims of Discourse

- A. Ways of distinguishing among the aims
 - 1. Language - connotative/denotative, tentative, figurative
 - 2. Thesis, hypothesis
 - 3. Speaker/audience relationship - friendly, hostile, impersonal
 - 4. Factuality
- B. How to write an essay answer

Unit II: Informative Discourse

- A. The informative characteristics - comprehensiveness, factuality, surprise value
- B. Informative style
- C. Informative organizational patterns - modal, pyramid of surprise
- D. Basic newswriting and magazine writing
- E. The informative term paper

Unit III: Persuasive Discourse

- A. The persuasive proofs - logical, ethical, pathetic
- B. Persuasive style
- C. Organization of persuasive essays
- D. Writing short persuasive essays - problem, solution
- E. Writing the long persuasive essay

ENGLISH 102

Unit I: Scientific Discourse

A. Empirical science

1. Empirical characteristics - sample/population, experiment, data, formulas
2. The style of scientific writing
3. Organization of the scientific journal article
4. Writing the journal article
5. The scientific term paper (review of the literature)

B. Deductive science

1. Deductive characteristics - evidence, axioms, definitions
2. Organization of deductive arguments
3. Writing the deductive argument

Unit II: Exploratory Discourse

- A. Exploratory characteristics - dogma, anomaly, crisis, search for a new model, testing the new model
- B. The style of exploratory writing
- C. Organizing the exploratory essay
- D. Using borrowed models to solve problems
- E. Writing the exploratory essay

Unit III: Expressive Discourse

- A. Expressive characteristics - being-for-self, being-for-others, being in the world
- B. Expressive style
- C. Organization of expressive essays
- D. Writing the expressive essay